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THE NEED OF A PRACTICAL PROGRAM IN ENGLISH TEACHING

IN THE Chamber of Commerce Building at Los Angeles, Dr. Easley Jones and I were examining a primitive Mexican cart. It was a crude affair of Robinson-Crusoe construction, apparently out of pieces of driftwood and the like flotsam, provided with a pole and ox-yoke. Said Mr. Jones, looking reflectively at it, "That reminds me of the present status of English teaching." I guffawed heartily, because he expressed so pat just what I had been ruminating as I had rambled about the country looking for remedies for what ails us. And the more I think about it, the more true the bill seems.

This is not merely, or wholly, caricature or a fancy picture. There is, unfortunately, a considerable and growing mass of evidence that the teaching of English isn't actually getting much of anywhere. Dr. Ashbaugh's discovery that senior pupils in high school make about the same proportion of the same mistakes as high school freshmen might not be altogether convincing. As Allen's Book Catalogue cleverly put it recently: "Children have a high sense of honor. They refuse to use in their private correspondence any knowledge of spelling they may have gained at the public expense."

However, this is only one item in a considerable bill of particulars. William L. Connor of the Cleveland Schools Research Bureau has more particular and disquieting evidence. He gave the same English tests to 1,000 seventh graders, 600 tenth graders, and 400 high school seniors. The resulting scores showed a quite lovely graph of increased proficiency grade by grade in each test. But Mr. Connors was not satisfied with that, and with an insidious directness he dug under these nice-looking scores. What he found was startling. The 400 best seventh graders did as well on every test as the 400 high school seniors. In other words, six years of English teaching in high school had effectively eliminated the non-academic pupils—60 per cent of them—and it had not done the rest any harm whatever.

In so far as this material is valid, and it unquestionably checks with what we are finding from a number of sources, it shows that we are, like Alice and the Red Queen, running hard and staying just where we were. Not only this, but the fact that English taught in the schools has so little effect on the English used outside of school may have even more serious implications. It is possible not that our English cart is failing to proceed, or is in danger of breaking up like the one-horse shay; it may actually be rushing with considerable speed in the opposite direction from where we profess to be heading.

The most significant finding of the Army Tests was not the fact that so many men were illiterate, although that was bad enough, but that so few who could read ever did so voluntarily. The same situation was disclosed in regard to writing such things as friendly letters. Too many people come out of school with a positive inhibition which prevents their reading anything that might by any possibility be considered good, which gets in the way of their writing anything if they can possibly avoid it, and which, in particular, makes them loathe and detest whatever might by any stretch

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of imagination be called good English; for they confuse good English, as teachers are too much inclined to do, with precise and rather abominable schoolroom English—grammatical, but incredibly sterile and dead.

One great need in English composition teaching today is to make available to teachers what specialists in language know and have published about the nature of language as a form of behavior. For the most part this is imbedded in rather formidable and difficult books. The principal or superintendent who wants to see a great gain in the work of his English teachers will do well to urge as many of them as possible to take courses in summer schools, not merely in education, and in literature, but specifically in the history of the English language. Such courses, available in a dozen leading institutions today, usually include enough work in phonetics to help teachers hear accurately the sounds that make up language. They also show teachers that English did not arise as a nicely logical and perfect scheme, but "just growed" out of a perfect chaos of dialects and variant forms in the medieval period.

The teacher who has had such a course will no longer ignorantly insist that pupils pronounce as separate words "don't you" and "did you"—forms which nobody but a pedant on parade ever actually used. In fact, they will discover that most of the pronunciations in the "Lists of Words Often Mispronounced," in courses of study, and in handbooks, exist only in very limited sections of the country or of society, or, often, nowhere at all save in the lively imagination of the compiler of the list. They will find out that all nouns in English tend toward the Germanic pronunciation with an accent on the first syllable, so that even French and other importations like *bureau* and *program* and *royal,* as soon as they have been in the language for a while, fall into that scheme; hence it is useless to try to hold *allies* and *recess* in common speech to the pronunciations which a few particular persons may prefer. They will come to realize that the dictionaries, useful as an attempt to record what their many and careful editors observe about the language as it is actually used, are of little value in recording spoken usage. For the record of what is to be found in books, the dictionary is indeed invaluable; but when its only record of the pronunciation of the indefinite article is *a* (long a) or *an* (short a), it is perfectly evident that the distionary does not tell us how everybody speaks the word a thousand times every day.

The dictionary, however, gives sound first aid to the teacher of English who wants to know what forms she has been taught to eschew should be accepted without question in pupils' compositions. As a record of written English, it is amply conservative for every purpose. What it accepts should be allowed without question in either speech or writing of pupils. In particular, when it gives more than one spelling, there should be no bothering about which form is "preferred," but either one or both should be accepted in any pupil's writing. Incidentally, before correcting spelling, the teacher will do well to look at the 1,500 to 2,000 words spelled more than one way in the prefaces to the larger dictionaries. There is a useful antidote to meticulousness here.

Above all, when an expression is marked *colloquial,* this does not mean that it is in use in a limited area, or is a dialect form. It means quite simply and clearly that it is "cultivated, informal usage," either in speech or writing. Since informal usage includes everything except funeral sermons, inaugural orations, and possibly the most solemn kinds of letters of application and literary essays—includes, in other words, practically all our occasions for speech and for writing throughout life—it is sufficiently good for practically all schoolroom purposes.

An idea of how far our courses in Eng-

lish have varied from the normal usage outside of schools may be had from the following list. This was made up of the report, upon 100 expressions commonly corrected in school courses and texts, by 27 of the most eminent linguists in the world. Of the 100 expressions, 45, including the list following, were accepted by more than three-fourths of this eminent jury as, in their observation, perfectly good cultivated English.

None of them *are* here.

This was the *reason why* he went home.

That will be *all right,* you may be sure.

We will *try and* get it.

I felt I could walk no *further.*

I've absolutely *got to* go.

There are some *nice* people here.

The members of that family often laughed at *each other.*

Will you be at the Browns' this evening?

The room is *awfully* cold.

We *only* had one left.

Who are you looking for?

We can expect the commission to *at least protect* our interests.*

That's a dangerous curve; you'd better go *slow.*

It is *me.*

You had to have property to vote.

A treaty was concluded *between* the *four* powers.

I *have got* my own opinion on that.

My contention has been *proven* many times.

One rarely likes to do as *he* is told.

There *was* a bed, a dresser, and two chairs in the room.

Drive *slow* down that hill.

I will go *providing* you keep quiet.

Can I be excused from this class?

What was the reason for *Bennett making* that disturbance?

Haven't you *got through* yet?

He never works *evenings* or *Sundays.*

They invited my friends and *myself.*

Everyone was here, but *they* all went home early.

He went *right* home and told his father.

That clock must be *fixed.*

The Rock Island *depot* burned down last night.

My *folks* sent me a check.

I *guess* I'll go to lunch.

I *can't seem* to get this problem right.

On the other hand, there is of course a sort of English which is without question illiterate—the hallmark of uneducated speakers and writers. The following expressions are probably in this category; and besides, in a recent study by C. H. Matravers, now head of the Orchard School, Indianapolis, it was found that ridding pupils of these expressions would eliminate 82 per cent of the total number of *possibilities for error* discovered in over 100,000 words of high school students' conversation reported in stenographic transcript. It is quite clear, then, that these forms are worth attacking, and it is possible that by resolutely concentrating attention on them we might get some result. At present we scatter attention on 1581 different matters and get nowhere:

ain't for *isn't, aren't, hasn't, haven't*
haven't no
them books
you *was*
leave go
come yesterday
seen it
play *good*
can't *neither*
there *is* or *was* several
isn't nothing
had ought
we *was*
give it (preterite)
wish I *would have* or if I *would have*
set down
hair *are*
done it
have *saw*

When we accomplish what Mr. Ward

*A split infinitive may often be awkward—so may its avoidance, as it would be in the sentence above—but it is not ungrammatical or an illiterate error.

calls the descent to earth and attempt a simple, practicable program of teaching pupils ordinary literacy and the use of good simple English for informal occasions, we have some chance of accomplishing our purposes in a measure that we ourselves and our friendly critics outside the schools can recognize and applaud.

Moreover, if we do not try to do such highfalutin things, but work earnestly to accomplish a simple and practical purpose, our colleagues in the other departments, seeing that our accomplishment of these ends would be of real and immediate benefit to them, may turn to and help us teach pupils to read or study more efficiently and to speak and write more simply and clearly and with a reasonable amount of cultivation.

It is possible that our courses in literature are much too ambitious for the actual pupils we now have with us. In the public schools at least, these are not the same kind of pupils we had 25 years ago. Our high school population has more than doubled in places where there has been no actual increase in the local population. This means that people who never went to high school are sending their children, that our pupils are coming from homes where there are no books, no magazines, no cultural contacts. Very probably we cannot in four years fit most of these people for college entrance; but we can give them something of real value, and it is our business to find out what this is. The vocational schools are doing that job, I suspect, very much better than we have done it in the academic high school. We need to find out how they are working, perhaps to help them with their large and ungrateful task, certainly to get many useful suggestions from them.

If our teaching of English is to succeed, we have to begin by finding out what English is really of worth, not to the scholar and the specialist, not in particular to the literary artist, poet or novelist, or the Chautauqua orator, but to the ordinary, everyday youngsters, the great majority in high schools who will never go to college and who will never have these specialized uses of English. As Wallace Rice has expressed it, "As literature is in comparison with the river of living speech in the mouths of everybody, merely a few drops of essence preciously distilled, we shall leave it for the extraordinary few who have a native gift for it, and revise every curriculum now established" to fit everybody's need. There will always be places in elective courses and in colleges for the special uses and users of English. But the English that is of most worth is the English of everyday speech and the informal writing and the simple, great pieces of literature. We need to teach our pupils to organize their ideas and to use their speech in the best manner possible. When we have cut our coat to fit our cloth, we may have a good deal more reason to be proud of our handiwork.

Sterling A. Leonard

CREATIVE COMPOSITION: LITERATURE IN THE MAKING

DISTASTE and, in many cases, actual hatred for English composition is unnecessary. There is no subject so difficult to teach, nor one more stimulating and enjoyable. Emerson in "The Poet" wrote: "All men live by truth, and stand in need of expression. In love, in art, in avarice, in politics, in labor, in games, we study to utter our painful secrets. The man is only half himself; the other half is his expression." We English teachers are man's other half. What a joy, what a pleasure we should receive in bringing into existence that half! What a task we make it—unbearable to ourselves as well as to our pupils.

I read once that an author was asked how he wrote. The reply was, "I do not know. I just write." By assignment to this subject I judge I have been asked,